*Journal of Semitic Studies LXXI/1 Spring 2026* doi: 10.1093/jss/fgaf033
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# WHEN DID FAṢĪḤ BECOME QABĪḤ? REHABILITATING CLASSICAL PHONOLOGICAL AND MORPHOLOGICAL FEATURES

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## Abstract

Most of the linguistic variation reported by the Arab grammarians has been ignored in linguistic scholarship, which has assumed that the grammarians prescribed a set of strict norms. This paper argues that the scholarly assumption is a misreading of what the grammarians say, and it is not reflected in written Arabic. By not appreciating the linguistic variation in Classical Arabic writing, classicisms are potentially misinterpreted as vernacularisms. Presenting the work of the grammarians, who were much more permissive of linguistic variation than usually appreciated, this paper goes on to show that such variation is in actual use. This provides evidence that what the grammarians describe is not just a collection of (non-standard) curiosities. By examining the use of linguistic features described by the grammarians, Quranic recitation and later classical Arabic prose texts, this paper shows that these features are part of Classical Arabic proper. This casts new light on how we evaluate linguistic features in Middle Arabic.

## 1. Introduction[1]

In the study of the history of Arabic, and especially of the texts labeled as 'Middle Arabic', a great deal of confidence has been placed in the fact that we have access to two fundamental truths. First: that we know what the Classical Arabic standard is, second, that we have a sense of what the spoken varieties of 'Neo-Arabic' looked like. In recent years, many of the simplifying assumptions about the 'Neo-Arabic Lingual type' have been challenged. Researchers have realized that the

[1] I would like to thank Hamza Khwaja, Phillip Stokes and Estara Arrant for giving valuable feedback on this paper. I thank Kevin Blankinship for valuable help and comments of the cited poetry in this paper. I would also like to thank Devin Stewart, Hamza Khwaja, Jeremy Farrell and Ahmad Al-Jallad for their comments and assistance while writing this article.



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appearance of modern dialects was not a single catastrophic event in the early Islamic period, but rather that the dialects had been developing for centuries. Not all striking typological similarities found between the modern dialects today can be back-projected onto the Middle Ages, and even these very typological similarities have been challenged as being oversimplified.[2]

The idea that we 'know' what the norms of Classical Arabic were, and that these were a set of stable features from before Islam all the way until the modern period has not been met with nearly as much scrutiny as it deserves. Many features that are 'normative' today are retrojected onto the early Islamic period, if not onto the pre-Islamic period, uncritically, even in cases where these were demonstrably not yet the norm in the early Islamic period. The early Arabic grammarians were vastly more permissive of variation and in no way declared features that are now no longer part of the standard language to be wrong, substandard, or even obviously worse than what became the Classical Standard.

The Classical Standard that we know today did, however, come from somewhere. What gets described as the Classical Standard in contemporary textbooks is fairly close to what is usually called 'Modern Standard Arabic'. However, recent scholarship has established that the Classical norms were not crystalized in the pre-Islamic period; rather taking several centuries to become established in the Islamic period. Understanding when exactly such norms become broadly accepted is of vital importance in the study of Middle Arabic, forms cannot concretely be declared 'non-standard', 'substandard' or 'neo-Arabic' if we do not know when these features stopped being considered part of the norms of Classical Arabic. Given this context, the present paper will examine a number of features that were once considered *faṣīḥ* 'eloquent', but are now no longer 'standard', and see if we can pin down when these became *qabīḥ* 'ugly'. Examples show that many features that have been broadly declared 'non-standard', 'substandard' or even 'neo-Arabic' are, upon investigation, ancient features considered Classical in our earliest sources of Classical Arabic, and many continue to be used in Classical Arabic sometimes until as late as the 20th century.

## 2. Sources for 'Classical Arabic'

If we are to understand Middle Arabic corpora within the context of interactions between the classical language and the vernacular, it should

[2] For an extremely useful overview on the *status quaestionis* on this topic see Watson (2011)



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ideally be compared with the norms of the classical language and the vernacular at the time. Getting access to the vernacular of the time is, exactly due to the diglossic nature of Arabic writing, extremely difficult. The 'known entity' of Classical Arabic has, however, often been used to deduce features about the vernacular: whenever a feature does not follow the classical norm, then it *must* reflect the vernacular (or a pseudocorrection). This line of argumentation is not without merit, but can only be applied with any reasonable amount of certainty when we actually know what the classical norms at the time and place are.

We will describe what the Classical Arabic norms of the time are, by examining a number of sources that should self-evidently be understood as impeccable sources of 'Classical Arabic'. First, the descriptions of the Arab grammarians. These provide a primary source of the classical language, but are often misread. While scholarship acknowledges that what the grammarians describe is not in line with the assumed norms of 'Classical Arabic', these forms are often dismissed as 'dialectisms'. Close study of the grammarians shows that they do not distinguish between 'Classical standard' and 'dialects' (as, for example, Rabin [1951, 13] assumes), all they describe is *ʿarabiyyah*, and the *ʿarabiyyah* consists of all these dialects (see Van Putten, 2022, 39–44). The lack of prescriptive pronouncements is of such an extreme nature that one often cannot derive or deduce the current Classical norm at all, unless one reads it into those sources. A poignant example is that, if one follows the description of Sībawayh, one may deduce that تشتهيه may be pronounced *tištahīhi* (the Najdi way), or *taštahīhu* (the Hijazi way), but there is in fact no description that coincides with the amalgamated *taštahīhi* (the current classical standard). By defining the correct Classical Arabic form to be only *taštahīhi* we would have to conclude that what Sībawayh describes is not Classical Arabic (Van Putten, 2022, 40).

A second source for Classical Arabic is the Qurʾān. Researchers who measure Middle Arabic writingast against Classical Arabic norms often seem unaware that the Qurʾān is not in line with assumed standards. The current focuses on features of the language that are primarily reflected in vocalization rather than the consonantal skeleton. This means we have access to two main sources for these details of Classical Arabic in the Qurʾān: first, literary descriptions of the Quranic reading traditions (*qirāʾāt*). Such traditions are explicitly attributed to historical figures. This material has the advantage that we can show that at a certain time and a certain place a particular way of reading the Qurʾān was considered acceptable, not only by the person reciting as such themselves, but also by their students who transmitted such readings.



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This discussion considers both readings now considered canonical, as well as those that are no longer considered canonical. At the time that these readers were active there was not yet an established canon, which only starts taking shape in the fourth Islamic century after Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936), thus, assuming only those readers that became normative later is anachronistic.[3] A second source for Classical Arabic in the Qur'ān may be derived from vocalized Quranic manuscripts. These have the downside of being more difficult to date and locate, but the upside of revealing variation which the chains of transmissions in the literary sources may have filtered out throughout the centuries.

Finally, as a third source—in an attempt to show that the behaviour that we find in the Qur'ān is not just a case of 'Qur'ān only' Classical Arabic (not a category ever explicitly recognized in the Islamic tradition)—this paper examines the appearance of such non-textbook Classical features in vocalized Classical Arabic manuscripts. Classical Arabic manuscripts are here defined as later documents, which by their consonantal skeleton follow the Classical norms as laid out by the Arab grammarians and the Qur'ān, and by looking at texts that are understood by the Islamic tradition and Western scholars to be impeccable examples of Classical Arabic. Such sources often help to situate features that would otherwise stay in the 'Epic time' of the pre-Islamic/early Islamic era (as furnished by the grammarians and the Qur'ān), in a later time. This shows that these features do in fact have a life and continue to be used, even in times when certain Middle Arabic materials would have been produced.

The other important traditional source, poetry, will not be discussed here in much detail. Not because it is of no interest to the features discussed here, but in many cases because it is of *too much* interest. Due to the metric and rhyme constraints of the genre, the amount of morphological, phonological and syntactic variation explored in poetry often far exceeds that which we find in more ordinary prose.[4] Some of the features discussed here are frequently found in poetry, and continue,

[3] It should be noted here that the famous three requirements for a 'valid reading', namely, 1. Proper *'isnād*, 2. Agreement with the Uthmanic *rasm*, and 3. Correct Arabic grammar are not requirements that were explicitly formulated yet by Ibn Muǧāhid. Moreover, it would be a mistake to think that only the canonical readings fulfill these requirements. There are many readings transmitted in early *qirā'āt* works that fit these criteria, and they are never excluded from the canon on the basis that their grammar is considered faulty or non-canonical.

[4] Just consider the line by the modern poet Ahmad Shawqi (1868 - 1932) *yā rabbi ṣalli wa-sallim mā 'aradta 'alā // nazīli 'aršika xayri* ***r-rusli kullihimī***, which contains the Najdi syncopated plural *ar-rusli* rather than the textbook *ar-rusuli* and the long harmonized 3mpl. suffix *-himī* rather than the textbook *-him*.



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essentially, into the modern period in this genre. But it is of course imaginable that such features are pure poetic licenses, and I wish to show here that non-textbook features can even occur when poetic license cannot be invoked.

The features discussed here place many features considered to be 'Middle Arabic', 'non-Classical' or even 'Neo-Arabic' in a new light. While there are features of the Middle Arabic corpus that are explicitly unlike Classical Arabic norms (especially in terms of case and mood inflection), countless examples of phonological and morphological features found in such corpora are neither considered wrong nor non-Classical, either explicitly by Arab grammarians, or in Quranic recitation. In such cases it is not possible to attribute such features, necessarily, to influence of the vernacular. This should challenge our assumptions on whether such features are to be considered non-Classical or not. Besides this, this paper will explore cases in which later Classical Arabic vocalized manuscripts continue to reflect such features, to give a sense of historical depth that certain features continued to be acceptable.

What follows is an overview of several features that are especially common or notable throughout a range of Classical texts that are well-attested among the grammarians and the Qur'ān, but despite this are frequently declared non-Classical, despite the fact that these features continue to be used in Classical Arabic writing for centuries. Such features do not form particularly clear thematic units, so the sections that follow are necessarily somewhat scattershot. I have tried to organize these examples in a way that makes some sense.

### 2.1 *Hamzah*

One of the notable features of Classical Arabic is its generally conservative retention of the *hamzah* as compared to all modern, as well as a number of ancient, dialects. It is widely understood that the early Islamic Arabic of the Hijaz lacked the *hamzah* and that this gives rise to the curious Islamic-era disappearance of the *'alif* as the sign for the *hamzah*—a value it clearly had in pre-Islamic Arabic—being replaced by 'seats for the *hamzah*' (Van Putten, 2023b, 111–13). Based on rhyme and orthographic practice there is a compelling point to be made that the Quranic text, reflecting its Hijazi Arabic origins, in fact lacked the *hamzah* in almost all positions (Van Putten, 2018). The earliest Quranic manuscripts, of course, lacked the *hamzah* sign altogether, as it had not yet been invented.

What is not usually recognized, however, is that the grammarians described the possibility of dropping the *hamzah* as part of Classical



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Arabic, and saw nothing wrong with such a practice (Sībawayh, 1988, III: 541ff.). While most Quranic readings are rather conservative, even within the canonical readings there are those that drop any post-consonantal *hamzah* at word-boundaries—Warš (d. 197/812) transmitting from Nāfiʿ (d. 169/785): Q10:13 *wa-la-qad ahlaknā* (not *ʾahlaknā*!) 'and we have destroyed', *al-arḍ* 'the earth')—any *hamzah* that is post-vocalic and the first root consonant—again Warš *mūmin* 'believer', *muwaḏḏin* 'announcer' but *raʾs* 'head', *qaraʾta* 'you read', *fuʾād* 'heart'), or any pre-consonantal *hamzah* (ʾAbū Jaʿfar, d. 130/747), and as an option for ʾAbū ʿAmr (d. 154/770), *mūmin, muʾaḏḏin, rās, qarāta, fuʾād*) (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §1466–72). But there are even notable transmission paths no longer considered canonical, from the canonical readers and transmitters that lack *hamzah* (almost) completely. This is the case for the transmission of al-ʿUmarī (d. after 270/884) from ʾAbū Jaʿfar, and the path of al-ʾAʿšā (d. ca. 200/816) from Šuʿbah (d. 193/809) transmitting from ʿĀṣim (d. 127/745) (al-Ṭabarī 2021, III: 131–222; al-Dānī, 2007, 561–66).

There are many examples throughout the Quranic readings in which words unexpectedly lack *hamzah* where one would expect it when examining their phonological system otherwise. A famous case of this is the now widespread recitation of Ḥafṣ (d. 180/796) from ʿĀṣim: Q112:4 *wa-lam yakun lahū* ***kufuwan*** *ʾaḥad* 'and he has no equal', which one would expect to be *kufuʾan*[5] in a reading with a conservative *hamzah* like Ḥafṣ, analogous to his *luʾluʾan* 'pearl' (Q22:23; Q35:33; Q76:19). One may also mention al-Kisāʾī (d. 189/804) and Xalaf (d. 229/844) who read *aḏ-ḏīb* 'the wolf' (Q12: 13, 14, 17) instead of *aḏ-ḏiʾb*, but no other similar nouns with the sequence *iʾ* with the loss of *hamzah* (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §1482).

The practice that appears in the Quranic reading traditions, then, is a rather nonchalant attitude towards retaining the *hamzah*. Even in readings that are otherwise very conservative in the retention of their *hamzah*, it was possible every now and then to adopt a word form without *hamzah*, without this being considered wrong or non-Classical.

This attitude is not restricted to Quranic recitation. From the many rhymed book titles that would not work if the *hamzah* were pronounced, it is clear that this option is available as a poetic license to authors, e.g. *ʾIršād* ***al-mubtadī*** *wa-taḏkirat al-muntahī fī al-qirāʾāt al-ʿašr* by ʾAbū al-ʿIzz al-Qalānisī (d. 521/1119) and *Kitāb ʾIḥkām* ***al-rāy***

[5] And indeed *kufuʾan* is the reading of all canonical readers and transmitters besides Ḥafṣ, with the exception of Ḥamzah and Xalaf, who read *kufʾan* (ibn al-Ǧazarī 2018, §2668, §2670).



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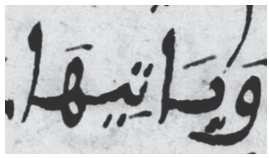
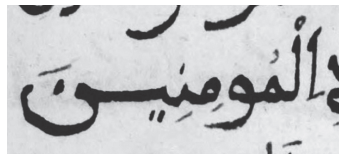
*fī ʾaḥkām al-ʾāy* by Ibn al-Ṣāʾiġ al-Ḥanafī (d. 776/1392). Even a casual look at vocalized Classical Arabic manuscripts that are otherwise conservative in their *hamzah* use and consistent in marking it frequently reveals unambiguous cases of the loss of *hamzah*. Such optional dropping of *hamzah* appears as late as the 18th century. For example, in an Ottoman copy of the *Dalāʾil al-Xayrāt* (BnF Arabe 6859, dated 1170 AH/ 1756–7 CE) we find an unambiguous *mašiyyatuka* for 'Your will', rather than *mašīʾatuka*, whereas the manuscript is otherwise very conservative in its *hamzah* use (Van Putten, 2021b, 385f.) (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: BnF Arabe 6859, 36r, l. 10

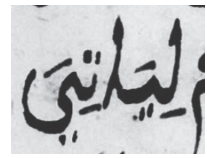
Maghrebi copies of the *Dalāʾil al-xayrāt* go much further and lose word-initial *hamzah* regularly at word-boundaries in post-consonantal position, and in pre-consonantal position when it is the first root consonant (Van Putten, 2021b, 380–82, 385–86). While such dropping reflects an affinity to the North-African recitational mode of the Qurʾān (i.e. the reading of Warš *ʿan* Nāfiʿ), the fact of the matter is that we are dealing with a Classical Arabic text that is *not* the Qurʾān which nevertheless does not have the conservative *hamzah* of what is assumed to be the classical norm. This does not seem to be exclusive to the recitational modes of the *Dalāʾil al-Xayrāt*. A 1649 copy of *al-Risālah* by Ibn ʾAbī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996) held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France under the shelf mark Arabe 1058 (Figure 2 below) is fully vocalized and consistently represents *hamzah*, in all positions *except* when it is a pre-consonantal first root consonant, in which case the *hamzah* is unwritten. The regularity is such that this cannot be attributed to forgetfulness. Instead, this must represent a real and intended pronunciation practice of this manuscript's scribe. This proves that dropping of *hamzah* in this position was acceptable in Classical Arabic prose as late as the 17th century, at least in North-Africa.



1r, l. 3 *wa-tātīhā*



3r, l. 2 *al-mūminīna*



3v, l. 3 *li-yātiya*



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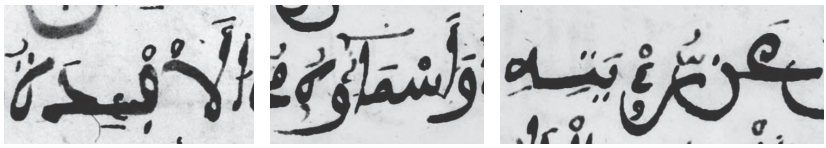
3v, l. 11 *ʾin šāʾa ll̥āhu* 2v, l. *al-qurʾāni* 2v, l. 8 *wa-šarāʾiʿihī*



4r, l.2 *al-ʾafʾidatu* 4v, l. 13 *wa-l-ʾasmāʾuhū* 6v, l. 7 *ʿarʿruʾyatihī*

Figure 2: The ***hamzah*** in BnF Arabe 1058

So, while the loss of *hamzah* is certainly a feature of modern Arabic, it is also part of the primary prestige dialect of the 7th century, which fed into the orthographic norms of Arabic. Even as the Classical norm developed towards having conservative *hamzah*, the option to drop it never disappeared up until the early modern period.

It is generally stated that all forms of Middle Arabic completely lost *hamzah*, e.g. Hopkins (1984, 19) states this for the early papyri, claiming that 'this is a phenomenon common to all non-Classical varieties of Arabic'. But, as we have seen, absence of *hamzah* is necessarily non-Classical as acknowledged by the grammarians and seen in Quranic recitation and later classical texts—which is something that seems to be admitted by Blau (1967, 84), but not considered particularly relevant, as the loss of *hamzah* as described by the grammarians is considered by him to be 'pre-Classical Arabic'. I do not see any reason to supply this feature with such a label—neither the Quranic reciters nor in fact later Classical authors considered doing so to be pre- or non-Classical. Moreover, it is rather difficult to show that the *hamzah* is lost completely in early Middle Arabic, because the standard Arabic orthography is based on a variety that lacked *hamzah*, as Blau (1967, 84) affirms: 'as a rule, it is rather difficult to decide on the strength of the orthography alone whether a particular word was pronounced with or without *hamza*. Classical orthography mirrors, as a sort of *kethîbh*, a pronunciation that has lost the glottal stop'.

The absence of an explicit *hamzah*-sign, to Blau (2002, 22–23) and Hopkins (1984, 22), appears to have been an argument for the absence of *hamzah*. This is anachronistic.[6] The Arabic script originally did not

[6] Equally anachronistic are arguments that rely on the assumption that the *yāʾ* as the *hamzah* is *yāʾ* it should not take dots. It is true that modern fonts today, and



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have a *hamzah* sign, as is obvious from its modern shape which was derived from the shape of the *ʿayn*. Our earliest unvocalized Hijazi manuscripts lack the *hamzah* sign. This graphical absence did not necessarily imply its absence in pronunciation, as is clear from the Quranic reading traditions that have a conservative *hamzah* despite its absence in the written text of the Qurʾān. When this sign was introduced is difficult to say, but one should not be surprised by its absence in 1st of 2nd century Hijri writings and these cannot imply anything about the presence of *hamzah* in the spoken register of the scribe. The Qurʾān is the first text to develop a regular and consistent means of expressing the *hamzah* but does so with red coloured dots. This system was never exported to non-Quranic texts. The earliest written attestation of the modern *hamzah* sign in prose Arabic is the Or. 298 held at the Leiden University Library, an incomplete copy of *Ġarīb al-ḥadīṯ* by ʾAbū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 223 AH/837 CE) which is dated 252 AH/866 CE .[7] By contrast, the Kufic style parchment copy of the *Jamharat al-nasab* by Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204 AH/819 CE) completely lacks any sign for the *hamzah*[8]

20th century typewriters typically have great difficulty writing a ئ with dots. But for most of Islamic history, *hamzah* was frequently written on top of dotted *yāʾ*s. There is nothing about the *hamzah* sign that requires the removal of the dots on the *yāʾ*. Not in the 11th century, like the Ibn al-Bawwāb Quran (391 AH/1000 CE; Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Is. 1431) which for example writes *ʾulāʾika* with dots on the *yāʾ* (Q2:5, 9v, l. 9), nor in the 21st century, like the print copy of the Warš Quran published by the King Fahd Quran Complex which regularly does the same (e.g. Q2:5, pg. 2). Absolutely nothing can be deduced about the status of the *hamzah* from the fact that the *yāʾ* is dotted in words such as بيس for *biʾsa/bīsa* (or *báisa/ba.isa*) or بير for *biʾr/bīr* (*pace* Hopkins 1984, 21; Blau 1967, 68; 2002, 33).

[7] The slightly earlier Wahb b. Munabbih papyri, whose *ḥadīṯ dāwūd* papyri are dated to 229 AH/844 CE also show *hamzah* signs, but I am not confident that these are written in the same ink and pen as the original text. They might be later additions. In this manuscript the use of *hamzah* is exceedingly rare. So rare in fact that the editor, Khoury, concluded that the manuscript reflected a *hamzah*-less variety (Khoury, 1972, 18, 22). I do not think this follows. Clearly, even if *hamzah* is available, it is always an optional sign like anything else that is not part of the consonantal skeleton of the text. Also in *Ġarīb al-ḥadīṯ* the *hamzah* is extremely sparse, but the text is written in otherwise impeccable Classical Arabic. Should we conclude the *hamzah* was unpronounced in all cases where it is not written? This strikes me as unlikely. We are lucky in the case of *Ġarīb al-ḥadīṯ* as we have insight into how its author, ʾAbū ʿUbayd, believed to be proper Classical Arabic, because his recitation of the Quran is well-transmitted. The descriptions of his reading reveals that he had a very conservative use of *hamzah*, only dropping the *hamzah* in *aḏ-ḏīb* 'the wolf' (al-Xuzāʿī, 2013, 486–87).

[8] Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Arabe 2047. Edited by Farrāǧ (ibn al-Kalbī, 1982, 16–26) who, of course, dutifully reinstates the *hamzah*s into the text.



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or vowel signs.[9] Based on palaeographic nature of the Kufic C.III style, it cannot have been copied much later than *Ġarīb al-ḥadīt*,[10] and by virtue of needing to post-date Ibn al-Kalbī's having actually written it, it cannot have been much earlier either.

So we have a *terminus post quem* for the sparing and optional use of the *hamzah* in the middle of the 3rd century with an explicit sign, but how much earlier was it really introduced? Some sections of the phonetic chapters of *al-Kitāb* by Sībawayh (d. ca. 180/796) are difficult to understand under the assumption that no *hamzah* sign was present at all,[11] but very often he uses the formula *taqdīruhā* 'its explicitation is', repeating the word just cited but now with an explicit *ʿayn* in the position where the *hamzah* is supposed to go. For example, in the discussion on the formation of *nisbah*s he says the following:

> *Wa-ḏālika qawluka fī rabīʿata rabaʿiyyun, wa-fī ḥanīfata ḥanafiyyun, wa-fī jaḏīmata jaḏamiyyun, wa-fī juhaynata juhaniyyun, wa-fī qutaybata qutabiyyun, wa-fī šanūʾata* (شنوة) *šanȧiyyun* (شني), *wa-taqdīruhā šanūʿata* (شنوعة) *wa- šanaʿiyyun* (شنعي).
>
> 'And this is your speech: for Rabīʿah it's Rabaʿī, for Ḥanīfah it's Ḥanafī, for Jaḏīmah it's Jaḏamī, for Juhaynah it's Juhanī, for Qutaybah it's Qutabī and for Šanūʾah it's Šanaʾī—explicitation is šanūʿah and šanaʿī'
>
> (Sībawayh 1988, III: 339)

Such an explicitation would of course be unnecessary if the words mentioned just before it were spelled with *hamzah* (as they are in modern text editions today—though certainly not always in the manuscripts). This would suggest that Sībawayh was not yet fully used to, and seemingly not consistently using, the *hamzah* sign. This, I think, lends considerable credibility to the traditional attribution of the invention of the *hamzah* and a number of other orthoepic signs—most notably the ones Sībawayh uses and describes in his *waqf* chapter (Sībawayh, 1988, IV: 160) to denote pausal phenomena like *rawm*, *ʾiskān* and *tašdīd*—to his teacher al-Xalīl b. ʾAḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 175 AH/791–2 CE).[12]

[9] It is almost completely furnished with consonantal dotting (*ʾiʿǧām*), something that is rather surprising considering that Quranic manuscripts in this style are almost completely devoid of such marks. This shows that deliberate poverty of consonantal dotting was part of Quranic manuscript production, and not necessarily an aspect of the script itself.

[10] Déroche (1992, 36) dates the C.I style between the 2/8th and early 3/9th century, the C.III style may have continued a little later, but this is difficult to say.

[11] For example the discussion by Sībawayh (IV, 177–9) on pausal forms of hamzated nouns like *al-waṯuʾ#, al-waṯiʾ* ← *al-waṯʾu, al-waṯʾi*, etc. would be difficult to make sense of under the assumption the *hamzah* sign is not expressed at all.

[12] e.g. al-Dānī (1997, 6).



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This means that nothing can be said about the loss of the *hamzah* by the absence of the sign in documents that predate the middle of the 2nd century AH, but such arguments should also be applied with care in documents as late as the 9th century, where we have no reason to assume that the use of *hamzah* had become so ubiquitous that every manuscript should be expected to use it when they pronounced it. There is clear evidence of manuscripts from the 9th century that did not write it, where we cannot assume the scribe intended them to be unpronounced. This obviously has implications for both the status of the *hamzah* in the early Islamic papyri as well as in the earliest Christian manuscripts. These difficulties have not been appreciated enough. I believe we need to content ourselves with the knowledge that in the vast majority of cases we simply cannot know whether the word was intended by the scribe to be pronounced with *hamzah* or not from its spelling alone.

## 2.2 *Naql*

Much stronger arguments for the loss of *hamzah*—at least in some environments—can be derived from Arabic written in other scripts, not subject to the ambiguous orthographic norms of standard Arabic, or cases in which Christian or early Islamic Arabic deviated from the orthographic norms of standard Arabic. Thus, Early Judeo-Arabic spellings like אלרדיה for *al-'ardiyah* 'the cloaks' (Blau and Hopkins, 1987, 126f.) as well as الول for *al-'awwal* 'the first' (Hopkins, 1984, 31) convincingly point to the—at least occasional—loss of word-initial *hamzah* after the definite article (i.e. *al-ardiyah* and *al-awwal*).[13] But use of the standard orthography does not necessarily mean that this process is absent. This form of post-consonantal *hamzah* loss across word boundaries (and after the definite article) known as *naql* is regular for one of the canonical transmissions of the Qur'ān, and one that is still broadly recited today in North-Africa: that of Warš from Nāfiʿ, who indeed recites *alawwalu* (Q57:3) (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §1541). This type of *naql* is also found outside the Qur'ān, and it is unambiguously found in a number of 18th century copies of *Dalā'il al-xayrāt* from North Africa and Mali (Van Putten, 2021b, 380–82). The *Dalā'il*

[13] Such cases in fact also occur in the Quranic Consonantal Text, most notably الن for what is read as *al-'āna* or *al-āna* or in the interrogative *'āl-'āna* or *'āl-āna* (ibn al-Ǧazarī, 2018, §1045). But we may also include Q26:127 and Q38:13 اصحب ليكه variously read *'aṣḥābu l-'aykati* or *'aṣḥābu laykati* (ibn al-Ǧazarī, 2018, §2787) which occurs besides the spelling اصحب الايكه (Q15:78; Q50:14).



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*al-xayrāt* is, of course, a prayer book and accordingly, this Warš-like feature is presumably part of these documents because its recitational nature was influenced by the Quranic style, but it shows that such a process is not a 'Qur'ān only' phenomenon. Even though *naql* is well-attested in Quranic recitation, recognized as an option in Classical Arabic by the medieval grammarians, the phenomenon is nevertheless sometimes considered to be 'lower register' than keeping the *hamzah*. Thus commenting on *ʿan 'awlādika* → *ʿan awlādika* in a line of poetry by the pre-Islamic poet ʿAmr Ḏū al-Kalb, Jones admits that this is 'a well-known variation allowed by *ḍarūrat al-shiʿr*, [...] but even so it is possible that its use here was influenced by the Hudhayl dialect, which was one of those that dropped *hamzah* [...]. This would have been likely to have some effect even when the highest register of language was being used' (Jones 2011, 60). Implicit in this wording is that what would be considered 'the highest register' in pre-Islamic Arabic normally would retain *hamzah*. This is a value judgment of *naql* that Jones imposes on the pre-Islamic/early-Islamic period, but not one that is obviously present in our earliest sources.

A special case of *naql* may be found in the contraction of *min 'ajli* 'because of', which is quite commonly spelled univerbated as منحل in several Christian Arabic texts. This has been taken by Blau (1967, 101) as evidence for the general loss of *hamzah* in the register of Christian Arabic. But the very fact that it is specifically this phrase in which this form is common, whereas it is rare or non-existent in similar environments, should give us pause. From this distribution alone, it seems more likely that we are dealing with a typical univerbation through grammaticalization of a phrase, rather than a normal example of *naql*. Indeed, the Quranic recitation of 'Abū Jaʿfar—which in its canonical transmissions does not otherwise drop post-consonantal *hamzah*—has Q5:32 *minijli* (Ibn al-Jazarī 2018, §2981). Rather than reflecting some kind of vulgarism then, this form in Christian Arabic can equally be understood as a Classical univerbated form. It does not necessarily reflect a *hamzah*-less register.

### 2.3 *Rā'a*

The verb 'to see' which in Modern Standard Arabic is spelled رأى and pronounced *rȧā* frequently occurs in Middle Arabic corpora spelled as را (Blau, 1967, 98; Hopkins, 1984, 79; Blau, 2002, 40). These forms are interpreted by Blau as examples of the loss of *hamzah* giving *ra'ā* > *rā*. But it is not so obvious that this is the only possible interpretation, or even the correct one. As Blau (1967, 98n73) notes himself, را is the



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regular Quranic spelling.[14] Especially regarding the early Islamic period, it seems reasonable to interpret these spellings as following the same orthographic principles as the Qur'ān. One may, of course, interpret the Quranic spelling as representing *rā* as well, but this would bring us outside of Classical Arabic, while a Classical explanation is available. II-*hamzah* III-*yā'* verbs have attested metathesized forms in the perfect 3SG.M. forms, hence both *ra'ā* and *na'ā* are also reported to exist as *rā'a* and *nā'a* (al-Farrā', 2014, 80f.; Van Putten, 2022, 138f.) and this is likewise well-attested in lexicographical works (as conveniently summarized by Lane, 1863, 1004b). Among the Canonical readers we find the metathesized form *nā'a* is recited by Ibn ʿĀmir and 'Abū Jaʿfar, but *rā'a* is not transmitted among the canonical readers, this word is read as *rā'ā*, *ra'ē*, *ra'ǟ* or *re'ē* (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §3478). Considering such metathesized forms were well-attested in the early Islamic period, it seems prudent to interpret spellings like را as *rā'a*, which is just as much part of the Classical language as is *rȧā*. In fact *rā'a* can still be found, unambiguously in a fully vocalized Classical Arabic manuscript: *al-Majmūʿah al-Rašīdiyyah* by Faḍl Aḷḷāh b. 'Abū al-Xayr Rašīd al-Dīn written by the author himself in 1310 in which he spelled *rā'ahu* as رَآءَهُ (BnF Arabe 2324, 5v, l. 8, see Figure 3 below).[15] So, even as late as the 14th century this was still considered an acceptable, classical form of the verb *rȧā*.

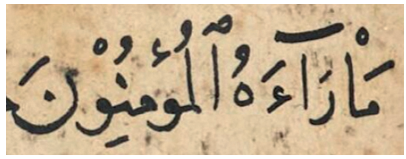


Figure 3: BnF Arabe 2324, 5v, l. 8
*mā rā'ahu l-mu'minūna*

## 2.4 *Nabī'*

A popular hadith, frequently cited in lexicographical works when discussing the word *nabiyy* 'prophet' or the meaning of *nabr* 'to apply the *hamzah'*, is, I think, first attested in al-Xalīl b. 'Aḥmad's (d. 170 AH) *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (al-Farāhīdī, 2003, s.v. نبر):

[14] There are two exceptions both in *Sūrat al-Naǧm*, one of which stands in rhyme (Q53:11, 18) but compare in the same Sūrah راه (Q53:13).

[15] It is important to note that contrary to modern use, the *maddah* sign on top of the *'alif* typically represents long vowels followed by *hamzah*, rather than *hamzah* that precedes *ā*. This spelling therefore represents *rā'ahu* and *ra'ā'ahū* would not only not make much sense, but would also be a misreading (Van Putten, 2021a).



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> *qāla rajulun li-n-nabiyyi—ṣallā ḷḷāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam—: ʿyā nabīʾa ḷḷāh!ʾ, fa-qāla: ʿlā tanbir bi-smīʾ*
>
> 'A man said to the prophet (peace be upon him): 'O prophe' of God'. He said: 'do not put a *hamzah* in my name!'

While there are versions of this hadith with minor variations, the gist remains the same: an unnamed figure addresses the prophet with the form *nabīʾ*, to which the prophet objects and expresses the wish to be addressed without a *hamzah*, i.e. *nabiyy*. Of course, there is good reason to think that this hadith was forged. It is never cited with an *ʾisnād*, and it is difficult to accept that in the lifetime of the prophet linguistic terminology was already developed enough for the prophet to have plausibly used such jargon.

Modern scholars often invoke this hadith in order to argue that Hijazis who had lost the *hamzah* in their speech would sometimes apply it pseudocorrectly (Rabin, 1951, 131–33; Fischer, 2002, 26). Zwettler (1978, 179f. n71) goes so far as to say that it is 'a peculiarly Ḥijāzi pseudo-correction and a feature neither of the *ʿarabīya* nor of the other dialects'. This is part of a larger argument that dismisses the possibility that the Qurʾān would have ever been recited in a mode of recitation that entirely lacked the *hamzah*.[16]

But where does this certainty come from that it is neither part of the *ʿarabiyyah* or of other dialects?[17] It is not exactly obvious that *nabiyy* is the original form and *nabīʾ* a later pseudocorrection. The grammarians did not consider it so. The word is borrowed from Hebrew or Aramaic, and in both languages this word originally had a glottal stop as is clear from the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible both in Biblical Hebrew (נביא) and Biblical Aramaic (Ezra 5:1 נביאה pl. נביאיא).[18] So, the pronunciation *nabīʾ* on the face of it looks like an archaism, and *nabiyy* is more likely an innovative realization. The claim that such

[16] Zwettler is apparently unaware of the fact that *hamzah*-less forms of recitation of the Quran exist, and I believe there is good reason to believe that the Qurʾān was originally recited in such a manner. See Van Putten (2018, 93–120), but also already Nöldeke (1904, 11) and Rabin (1951, 4f.).

[17] It should be noted that the dichotomy of '*ʿarabiyyah*' versus 'other dialects' is a modern construct, and not one the Arab grammarians themselves operated. The dialects *are* the *ʿarabiyyah*. Many misunderstandings about the Classical Arabic norms stem from the unfounded starting assumption that there is a *ʿarabiyyah* separate from the dialects. See also Van Putten (2022, 42).

[18] Presumably the connection has been so readily accepted because Syriac has lost the hamza in *nḇiyyā* 'prophet'. But the Syriac form is certainly a later development within Aramaic. As Aramaic loanwords in early Classical Arabic are consistently more archaic than Syriac, there is no reason to expect Arabic to descend from the innovative Syriac form in this case either (Van Putten, 2020a, 69–72).



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a pronunciation is not part of the *ʿarabiyyah* nor part of any spoken form seems to be based on Sībawayh's judgment, who considered the pronunciation *nabīʾ* and also *barīʾah* 'creation' to be rare and abhorrent (*qalīlun radīʾ*) (Sībawayh, 1988, III: 555). But despite his clear disdain for this pronunciation, Sībawayh considers the basis (*ʾaṣl*) of the form *nabiyy* to be *nabīʾ* (and *barīʾah* the basis of *bariyyah*). He explicitly mentions this word when discussing the dropping of *hamzah* when *ū*, *ī* or *ay* precede, adding that in such cases the *hamzah* is to be replaced with a *wāw* and *yāʾ* respectively citing: *xaṭīʾah* → *xaṭiyyah* 'sin', *nabīʾ* → *nabiyy* 'prophet', *maqrūʾ/maqrūʾah* → *maqruww/maqruwwah* 'readable', *ʾufayʾis* → *ʾufayyis* 'little hatchet', *barīʾah* → *bariyyah* 'creature' and *suwayʾil* → *suwayyil* 'little question' (Sībawayh, 1988, III: 547).[19] His disapproval of the pronunciations of *nabīʾ* and *barīʾah* does not stem from a conviction that these words should have never had a *hamzah* to begin with, but is rather because he considered the dropping of *hamzah* in these words more common and appropriate.

But it is not just on a theoretical level that *nabīʾ* exists in the *ʿarabiyyah*. While Zwettler confidently declares *an-nabīʾ* as not part of the Classical standard, without further citation or explanation (and Rabin, 1951, 26 does much the same), it seems to me that this would rather come as a surprise to millions of North-African Muslims who have and will continue to use *nabīʾ* (along with *nubūʾah* 'prophecy' and *barīʾah* 'creature') for centuries in their recitation of the Qurʾān according to the reading tradition of the Medinan Nāfiʿ (d. 169 AH) (Ibn al-Jazarī 2018, §1531, §1536). Certainly, we cannot claim something is not part of Classical Arabic if it is part of the Qurʾān? Even if Sībawayh had his misgivings for the form, he cannot be held as the sole arbiter of what is and is not 'Classical Arabic'.[20] Nāfiʿ, an earlier contemporary of his from Medina, clearly felt differently. We are presented, then, with two diametrically opposed views on what the proper pronunciation is by two scholars from the same period. If we are to maintain that the Quranic reading traditions are Classical Arabic, we must conclude that *nabīʾ*—despite Sībawayh's misgivings—was Classical Arabic too.

But it is not just in the isolated environment of Quranic recitation that *nabīʾ* and *nubūʾah* are used. While many text editions today will

[19] Sībawayh also explicitly endorses a base with *hamzah* in his discussion of the formation of the diminutive, claiming that for *bariyyah* and *nubuwwah* the only diminutives are *burayyiʾah* and *nubayyiʾah*, whereas for *nabiyy/nabīʾ* there are two options: *nubayy* and *nubayyiʾ* (Sībawayh, 1988, III: 460).

[20] After all, if we did that, we would have to pronounce منه and عنه as *minhū* and *ʿanhū* respectively, and not the now standard *minhu* and *ʿanhu* (Sībawayh, 1988, IV: 189).



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dutifully 'correct' the forms to *nabiyy* and *nubuwwah*, the forms are very common in medieval and early modern manuscripts from the Maghreb and West Africa. For *nubū'ah*, this is the only typical form. For 'prophet' in the singular, *an-nabiyy* seems to have become the standard (outside of Quranic citations, where *nabī'* is always used, in line with the dominant reading of the region). However, the plural consistently keeps the *hamzah*, in *an-nabī'īna*, and it is in fact so common that I have not encountered any manuscripts that do otherwise. For example, the 18th-20th century manuscript from Timbuktu which collects poetic lines along with commentaries has *li-n-nabī'īna* with *hamzah* (HMML SAV ABS 00053, 1r, l. 8).[21]

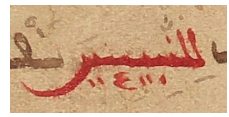

Figure 4: HMML SAV ABS 00053, 1r, l. 8

In a 1649 copy of *al-Risālah* by Ibn 'Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī we find *an-nubū'ah* (BnF Arabe 1058, 5v, l. 8). In the same manuscript we also find a vocative *'ayyuhā n-nabī'* 'O prophet' (23r, l.10, also 24r, l.10) besides *an-nabiyy* as an introduction to a cited Hadith (18v, l. 3).[22]

Figure 5: BnF Arabe 1058, 5v, l. 8, 23r, l.10, also 24r, l.10

This Maghrebi hamzated form of 'prophet' and 'prophecy' survives into the 20th century. The famous modern Tunisian exegete Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āšūr (1879–1973) in his monumental exegesis *al-Taḥrīr*

[21] This manuscript can be accessed here: https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/151127

[22] *nabī'* is also found in copies of the *Dalā'il al-Xayrāt*, and not only in the Maghrebi and West-African copies, even in the plural *'anbi'ā'*, which is also the reading of Nāfi' (Van Putten, 2021b, 386–89).



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*wa-l-Tanwīr* appears to have personally used the for *an-nabī'*, which is reproduced consistently in the posthumous publication of his Tafsīr from 1984. For example the opening page of the exegesis of Sūrat 'Āl 'Imrān where the title is spelled النبيء three times in fairly quick succession (Ibn 'Āšūr 1984, III, 143).

Declaring this hamzated form of *nabiyy* as 'a peculiarly Ḥijāzi pseudo-correction and a feature neither of the *'arabīya* nor of the other dialects' is not in keeping with the actual way the form is used in Classical Arabic, not only in the early Islamic period, but even in modern times.

## 2.5 *I'šar*

A very common feature in early Islamic papyri is to spell the 'ten' in numberals such as twelve/thirteen/fourteen as اعشر, which Blau labels as 'post-Classical' (Hopkins 1984, 114f.; Blau, 2002, 43) as opposed to the purportedly classical عشر. It is also attested in Christian Arabic as 'a characteristic of some texts' (Blau, 1967, 237–38) and even appears to occur in Judeo-Arabic (Hopkins, 1984, 114n4). Blau (1967, 237–38) suggests that these are an orthographic representation of compound numerals such as *'arba'ta'šar*, where the numeral is given an *'alif al-waṣl* to represent the *-'š-* cluster (See Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6: *sittata'šara rajulan* (Sinai Arabic MS 154, f. 7r)

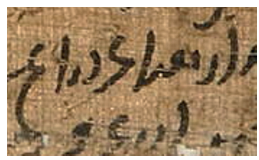

Figure 7: *'arba'ata'šara ḏirā'*
(P.RagibTroisDocuments 1. l. 6;
251 AH/865–6 CE)

While the analysis of spellings such as اربعة اعشر as representing *'arba'(a)ta'šar* strikes me as correct, should these spellings really be understood as non-Classical and/or post-Classical? As Blau (1967, 238, n182) already points out, such forms are explicitly acknowledged to exist in Classical Arabic by al-Zamaxšarī (d. 538/1143) in his *al-Mufaṣṣal* where he says: 'and among the Arabs there are those who quiesce the



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*ʿayn* so they say *ʾaḥadaʿšara* to avoid the repetition of voweled letters within a word' (al-Zamaxšarī 1879, 70).[23] Nothing in al-Zamaxšarī's account suggests that such a form is somehow less eloquent or to be avoided. The very fact that such forms frequently occur in our earliest Islamic papyri and Christian Arabic suggests such a syncopated form was common in the early Islamic period. Indeed, the existence of such forms can likewise be deduced from the fact that it is used in Quranic recitation. The canonical Medinan reciter, ʾAbū Jaʿfar (d. 130 AH/ 747 CE) recites *iṯnâʿšara šahran* (Q9:36),[24] *ʾaḥadaʿšara kawkaban* (Q12:4) and *ʿalayhā tisʿataʿšara* (Q74:30) (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §3205). Outside of the now canonical two transmitters, several other canonical readers are reported to have recited with such forms, e.g. ʿAbbās ← ʾAbū ʿAmr, Hubayrah ← Ḥafṣ ← ʿĀṣim (only Q9:36), Ibn Jubayr ← His teachers (al-Musayyibī, ʾIsmāʿīl) ← Nāfiʿ, Ṭalḥah b. Sulaymān and Ḥammād b. Zayd ← ʿĀṣim (al-Dānī, 2007, 1152–53; Ibn Jinnī, 1998, I: 332; Ibn Xālawayh, 2009, 66; al-Ṭabarī, 2021, IV: 57). Such forms were thus even possible to be recited as Qurʾān, and are still present without any negative evaluation with much later grammarians. The *iʿšar*-base in twelve/thirteen/fourteen etc. was part of the Classical register in the early Islamic period, and the spelling اعشر was the regular spelling of this form. Such forms should not be considered 'non-standard' or 'post-Classical'.

### 2.6 CiyūC *Plurals*

Occasional pieces of evidence are found in the Middle Arabic corpora for assimilation of *u* to *i* next to *y* in the *fuʿūl* type plural of hollow roots. Thus, the Damascus Psalm fragment attests τηουρ 'birds' which certainly stands for *ṭiyūr* and not *ṭuyūr* (Al-Jallad, 2020, 20). This has been suggested to be a non-Classical, 'neo-Arabic' feature (Blau, 2002, 31). Indeed, a number of dialects today have the *ṭiyūr* option, but this is also part of Classical Arabic. Al-Farrāʾ (2014, 56) admits the forms *buyūt, biyūt* and *büyūt*, and all such forms are attested in Quranic recitation among the canonical readers (see Van Putten, 2022, 74f.). From a purely historical linguistic point of view, the *biyūt* and *büyūt* forms

[23] *Wa-mina l-ʿarabu man yusakkinu l-ʿayna fa-yaqūlu ʾaḥadaʿšara ḥtirāsan min tawālī l-ḥarakāti fī kalimatin*.

[24] The fact that ʾAbū Ǧaʿfar recites *iṯnâ* with *madd* means that he treats these numerals as a single word, as *madd* of long vowels only happens before *hamzah* or word-internal superheavy syllables (Van Putten, 2021a). This treatment of the -teens as a single word is also considered the proper analysis by al-Zamaxšarī, and uses this to explain why the teens take the definite article on the first section in Classical Arabic, i.e. *al-ʾaḥada ʿašaru*.



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are innovative. But 'more archaic' does not straightforwardly mean 'more classical'. This is clear from al-Farrā', who endorses the realization *büyūt* as 'the best of the linguistic options' (*'ajwadu hāḏihi l-luġāt*). Thus, innovative forms can be perfectly Classical, and it is not unusual for innovative rather than archaic forms to become part of the Classical standard as we will see several more times throughout this article. Therefore, such forms cannot without further qualification be taken as a deliberate or accidental use of 'Neo-Arabic' as opposed to simply a 'Classical' feature.

## 3. Pronominal Morphology

The medieval Arab grammarians allowed for a striking amount of pronominal variation in the pronominal clitics and plural independent pronouns. The third person suffixes are reported to occur both harmonized and unharmonized after *i*, *ī* and *ay*. The third person singular suffix may either be shortened after heavy syllables or be kept long. The plural pronouns may either occur in a lengthened form or a short form. All of these occur in Quranic reading traditions and early Quranic manuscripts, occasionally in configurations and conditionings that are even more exotic (Van Putten and Sidky, 2024). It is therefore not at all a given that the high register target would have had the strict standard Arabic system that we find today, i.e. *-hu/-hi/-hū/-hī* + *-hum/-him*. The table below illustrates some of the possible attested variations in various conditioning environments.

| – + hv | harmony—+ hv | ˘ + hv | harmony ˘ + hv |
|---|---|---|---|
| *-hu* | *-hu* | *(-hu)* | *(-hu)* |
| *-hū* | *-hū* | *-hū* | *-hū* |
| | *-hi* | | *(-hi)* |
| | *-hī* | | *-hī* |
| **hum** | **harmony + hum** | **hum /_CC** | **harmony + hum /_CC** |
| *hum* | *hum* | *humu* | *humu* |
| *humū* | *humū* | | *himi* |
| | *him* | | *himu* |
| | *himī* | | |
| | *himū* | | |

**Table 2: Pronominal Variation in Classical Arabic**



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In other words, a form like *ʿalayhum* is Classical Arabic. This is, after all, the reading of the Canonical readers Ḥamzah and Yaʿqūb. Despite the existence of such pronominal forms, all too often in the study of Middle Arabic, the Modern Standard Arabic norms are back-projected onto the early Islamic period. Thus, Blau & Hopkins (1987, 152) conclude, I believe rightly, that the spellings with *wåw* in harmonizing environments such as in עליהום 'on them' and עלא חאלתהום 'in their condition' point to a lack of vowel harmony in the third person pronominal suffix, but they are incorrect to state that 'according to classical Arabic they should have contained *i*' (Blau and Hopkins, 1987, 154). There is nothing non-Classical about readings *ʿalayhum* and *ʿalā ḥālatihum* and these cannot be used as arguments for the loss of the case system.[25] The Judeo-Arabic evidence is equivocal on this: עלא חאלתהום could of course also point to a caseless *ʿalā ḥālathum*. But Judeo-Arabic's failure to abide by the not-yet established standard that *-hum* should harmonize is not an argument in favour of this. The Damascus Psalm Fragment actually seems to retain the genitive all the while having an unharmonized *-hum* in three instances βη αυθάνjύμ [bi-ʾawṯāni-hum], βη μενχουτέτηύμ [bi-menḥūtēti-hum] and μιθλ αβαjύμ [miṯl ʾābāy(i)-hum] (Al-Jallad, 2020, 22).

The study by Stokes (2023a) examines the pronominal variation in vocalized Christian Arabic gospel manuscripts and with that uncovered a whole universe of pronominal variation that, while at times chaotic, seems mostly to represent internally consistent systems that do not agree with what becomes the standard norm, in manuscripts that are significantly later still than the Early phonetic Judeo-Arabic papyri or the Damascus Psalm fragment (Gospel manuscripts ranging from the 13th to 15th century).

Among the Meccan Qurʾān reciters, as still represented by the Canonical reader Ibn Kaṯīr, it was typical to lack the length disharmony found in reading traditions from other regions as well as what becomes the Classical standard. So while the modern standard has *nazzalnāhu, nazzalahū, fīhi, bihī, minhu*, Ibn Kaṯīr invariably has the long form in such cases: *nazzalnāhū, nazzalahū, fīhī,*[26] *bihī, minhū*. This kind of behaviour also exists outside of Quranic recitation. Stokes (2021) studies the pronominal system of a Judeo-Arabic commentary on the *Pirqe ʾåḇoṯ* attributed to Dåwiḏ han-Naḡiḏ (d. 1300). This text strikingly shows the harmonized forms of the 3SGM pronoun but consistently

[25] Admittedly, the spellings of the 3SGM suffix in genitive position spelled ־וה also proffered for the loss of case system is much more compelling.

[26] The most popular reading tradition today, the transmission of Ḥafṣ from ʿĀṣim, in fact has *fīhī* once in Q25:69.



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spells them plene, which, within the orthographic system of this text would suggest that these were always long *-hū* and *-hī*, even after heavy syllables, e.g. יעטיהי for *yaʿṭīhī* 'give him'. Blau (1986, 458) considered such forms 'contrary to Classical grammar' and argued that they must have been introduced by copyists who were less well-versed in Classical Arabic than the original author. But this anachronistically imposes the modern standard norm on Medieval Arabic. Forms with long vowels are not only broadly found in the Quranic reading traditions but are explicitly recognized by Sībawayh as acceptable Classical Arabic. To declare these forms non-Classical is simply not in keeping with the actual corpus of Classical Arabic.

Finally, even in what by all accounts is obviously Classical Arabic, such as the well-known prayer book *Dalāʾil al-xayrāt* we see clear evidence of an alternative pronominal system which uses the long forms of the plural pronouns (*humū, -humū/-himū, ʾantumū, -kumū*) whenever the next word starts with a *hamzah* as late as the 18th century, showing that morphological variation within the Classical register stays productive until the modern period (Van Putten, 2021b, 378).

### 3.1 *Hāḏī*

In Modern Standard Arabic, the proximal feminine singular pronoun is *hāḏihī*, but besides this form the medieval grammarians also allowed for *hāḏī*, which they identify as the Najdi form whereas *hāḏihī* was considered the Hijazi form (Sībawayh, 1988, IV: 182). This form can occur side-by-side in poetry together with *hāḏihī* depending on the metrical requirements. For example, al-Maʿarrī (d. 449 AH/1057 CE) uses the two forms in two subsequent lines of his poem (al-Maʿarrī, 1987, 974):

> *Ṣāḥi* ***hāḏī*** *qubūrunā tamlaʾu r-ruḥ-/ /-ba fa-ʾayna l-qubūru min ʿahdi ʿādī*
> *xaffifi l-waṭʾa mā ʾaẓunnu ʾadīma l-/ /-ʾarḍi ʾillā min* ***hāḏihi*** *l-ʾajsādī*
>
> 'O friend, these graves of ours fill the vast plains, so where are the graves from the age of ʿĀd?
>
> Tread lightly, I don't think the surface of the earth is anything but these bodies'

However, it is not only used as a convenient dialectal form for metrical purposes, it is also the form that the Meccan reader Ibn Muḥayṣin (d. 123 AH/741 CE) uses regularly throughout the Qurʾān in his recitation (al-Ṭabarī, 2021, III: 418; al-ʾAhwāzī, 2006, 91).[27] Such forms

[27] It is also said to have been transmitted for 'some transmissions from Ibn Kaṯīr' (*Ibn Kaṯīr fī baʿḍi riwāyātihī*) (d. 120 AH/738 CE) (ibn Xālawayh, 2009, 4). This



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are also attested sometimes in what are traditionally considered 'Middle Arabic' corpora. For example, Stokes (2023b, 8) informs us that the rhymed prose gospel, found in the manuscript Vatican Arabic 17 (1009 CE), Vatican Arabic 18 (993 CE) and Leiden Or. 561 (15th c. CE) uses *hāḏī* on a number of occasions besides *hāḏihī*.

Within the traditional study of Middle Arabic, which commonly retrojects the norms of Modern Standard Arabic (which uses *hāḏihī*) onto earlier stages of Arabic, it would be tempting to see the use of *hāḏī* as an intrusion of the vernacular of the writers. After all, many modern dialects retain a reflex of *hāḏī* (e.g. Damascene *hādi~hāy*, Palmyrene *hāḏī*, Moroccan Arabic *hadi*, etc.). But such a conclusion would be premature. To the early grammarians and reciters—as well as much later poets—there was nothing particularly vulgar about *hāḏī* which was considered equally eloquent as *hāḏihī*. When both of these options are part of the 'high register', one cannot, without further qualification, conclude the use of such a form is an intrusion of the vernacular.

## 4. Vowels of Arabic

### 4.1 *Hollow Passives*

In Modern Standard Arabic the passive form of hollow forms has the pattern *qīla* 'it is said' < **quwila*. However, this is not the only form sanctioned by the Arab grammarians, who also allow *qūla* and an intermediary form with a rounded front vowel *qṹla* (Sībawayh, 1988, IV, 342f.; al-Farrāʾ, 2014, 14). The *qūla* variant is cited to have existed in some poetry but otherwise does not typically show up. The *qṹla* form, however, is well-known in Quranic recitation, it is the regular form used by al-Kisāʾī (d. 189/804), Hišām (d. 245/859) from Ibn ʿĀmir (d. 118/736) and Ruways (d. 238/852) from Yaʿqūb (d. 205/820). Several other readers only read it for a subset of the relevant verbs: Ibn Ḏakwān (d. 242/856) from Ibn ʿĀmir read *ḥṹla*, *sṹqa*, *sṹʾa(t)*, and Nāfiʿ and ʾAbū Jaʿfar only *sṹʾa*, *sṹʾa(t)* (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §2629).

When such forms are expressed in writing, this is done by placing a *ḍammah* before the *yāʾ*. This can be found both in early manuscripts that describe the Quranic reading traditions, such as the early copy of

reading, despite appearances, does not go against the consonantal skeleton of the text. The pausal form of *hāḏī* is still *hāḏih#*, thus following the pausal spelling principle هذه follows the text.



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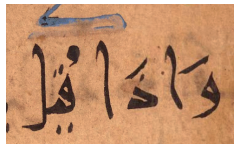
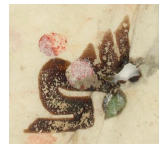
*Kitāb al-badīʿ* by Ibn Xālawayh (d. 370/980) copied in the author's death year.[28] It is also well-attested in vocalized Kufic manuscripts (where the *ḍammah* is a red dot on the baseline after the first root consonant) (see figure 8 below).



Q2:11 *wa-ʾiḍā qūla*
(Ar. 3051, 8r, l. 13)



Q11:77 *sūʾa* (secondary *sīʾa*)
(BNF Arabe 351, 148r, l. 5)

Figure 8: Hollow passives with front rounded vowel

This same spelling is attested with some frequency in the vocalized Middle Arabic corpus (Stokes 2022, 169–72).[29] Blau (1967, 189) expresses doubts as to whether this really represents the 'ancient' passive perfect *qūla*, but this strikes me as the most straightforward understanding.

### 4.2 *Final* ʾImālah

Despite the fact that at the time of writing, *ʾimālah* among the Arab grammarians and Quranic reading traditions had already received significant attention in western scholarship (Nöldeke et al., 2013, 539; Rabin, 1951, 116; Levin, 1992; Sara, 2007; Van Putten, 2017), Hopkins (2020, 72) nevertheless claims that '[i]n Classical Arabic (CA), the final vowel *-ā* is sometimes written with *alif* and sometimes written with *yāʾ*. According to early grammarians, Quranic *tajwīd* and the traditional pronunciation of CA, the two spellings are in sound identical'. None of these claims are true.[30] The early Arab grammarians have long recognized varieties of proper Arabic in which the word-final vowel spelled with *yāʾ* is distinct from the one spelled with *ʾalif*. The former has *ʾimālah*, i.e. is realized as *ē*, and the latter does not so it is realized

[28] Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Ar 3051.

[29] An awkward issue with the fonts in this paper has rendered these forms *qūla* in the article, but the author assures me he intended *qūla* (personal correspondence).

[30] Hopkins continues with a fairly compelling analysis of the Arabic orthography and how this must, at one point, have reflected a vowel *ē* (which he however, in my opinion incorrectly, takes as deriving from an earlier **ā*). The mistake is to consider these 'non-standard' and 'pre-Classical' (Hopkins, 2020, 83). I see no coherent definition of 'pre-Classical Arabic' that would include recitations of the Qurʾān from the second and third century AH.



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as *ā* (Sībawayh, 1988, IV, 120ff.; al-Farrā', 2014, 21f.; al-Mubarrad, 1994, III: 44). They show that III-*y* nouns and verbs have *ē* whereas III-*w* nouns and verbs have *ā*. As the correct pronunciation cannot be derived if we would take both of these verbs to have an underlying final *ā*, this distinction must be considered phonemic. This phonemic distinction is retained in a large number of Quranic reading traditions, most notably among the canonical readers, those of the three Kufans Ḥamzah, al-Kisā'ī, and Xalaf, who have *hadē, al-hudē* etc. but *da'ā* and *'aṣā-ka*. The still well-known and widely recited transmission of Warš from the Medinan Nāfi' keeps these vowels distinct: the former is realized as [æ:] and the latter as [a:] (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §1968–75, §2022–23).[31] Not only is it not true that the sounds are identical in Quranic *tajwīd*, it is not true for four out the ten canonical readings, as Table 3 below demonstrates.[32]

| | **Sībawayh** | **al-Farrā' & al.** | **The Kufans** | **Warš** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| III-y verbs | *hadē* | *hadē* | *hadē* | *hadǣ* |
| III-w verbs | *da'ē* | *da'ā* | *da'ā* | *da'ā* |
| III-y nouns | *al-hudē* | *al-hudē* | *al-hudē* | *al-hudǣ* |
| III-w nouns | *'aṣā-ka* | *'aṣā-ka* | *'aṣā-ka* | *'aṣā-ka* |
| CvCCā nouns | *ḏikrē* | *ḏikrē* | *ḏikrē* | *ḏikrǣ* |

**Table 3: *'imālah* among the grammarians and Quranic reciters**

The only claim that is not negated by the actual evidence, depending on one's definition, is the claim that it is pronounced as *ā* in 'the traditional pronunciation of CA'. If Hopkins by this means: the way that Classical Arabic is traditionally pronounced today, then the two are indeed identical in sound. But how long has that traditional pronunciation been the 'traditional pronunciation', and how widespread is that tradition? There can be no doubt that some classical poetry retained this distinction, since in a number of poems /ē/ and /ā/ do not interrhyme. For example, the Jahili poet Ka'b b. Zuhayr, has a

[31] Even the now dominant reading of Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim shows has *ē* once in a word that is spelled with *yā'*, namely محريها *maǧrēhā* (Q11:14) (ibn al-Ǧazarī, 2018, §1992).

[32] While more irregular in the other reading traditions, traces of this distinction are found also in the reading of 'Abū 'Amr and 'Āṣim.



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poem that rhymes exclusively with the *'alif maqṣūrah* that is spelled with a *yā'*, and thus has a phonemically distinct /ē/. It starts:

> *'alā bakarat 'irsī tuwā'imu man laḥē wa-'aqrib bi-'aḥlāmi n-nisā'i mina r-radē*
>
> 'Verily my wife got up early, doing as all blamers do,
> so bring ruination closer [to yourself] through the delusions of women!'

He then continues with the rhyme words ثنى *ṯinē*, فاكتسى *fa-ktasē*, النوى *an-nawē*, ارتأى *irtáē*, الشوى *aš-šawē*, عنى *'anē*, حنى *janē*, الرقى *ar-ruqē*, كفى *kafē*, اقتنى *iqtanē*, رأى *ráē*, حرى *jarē*, الوحى *al-wajē*, and وعى *wa'ē* (Ka'b b. Zuhayr, 1997, 9–10).[33]

Another interesting case of an explicit marking of 'imālah in a line of poetry outside of rhyme position is attested in *al-Farrā''s Luġāt al-Qur'ān*. Citing a line to show the existence of the hollow passive form *qūla* (rather than *qīla* or *qūla*, see previous section), he explicitly marks the word-internal *ġaḍbē* with *'imālah* by writing the word *mumāl* above it, in the edition and presumably also in the manuscript in which it was based (al-Farrā', 2014, 14f.).

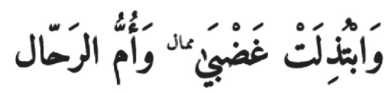


Figure 8: Screen capture of the text edition of *Luġāt al-Qur'ān*

> *wa-btuḏilat ġaḍbē wa-'ummu r-raḥḥāl wa-qūla: lā 'ahla lahū wa-lā māl*
>
> 'An angry woman and mother of the nomad became exhausted, and it is said: He has no family and no money'

Certainly, evidence for the phonemic distinction between word-final /ē/ and /ā/ is not attested very often in vocalized non-Quranic Classical Arabic manuscripts, but it can be found surprisingly late. In a 20th century West African copy held at the Cambridge University Library (MS Or. 2251) of *Dalā'il al-xayrāt*, we find very consistent evidence of the marking of /ē/ with the traditional *'imālah* sign: a red dot below the letter that precedes the *yā'*.

[33] A much more in-depth treatment of the final /ē/ in poetry is forthcoming in Alex Z. Foreman's forthcoming dissertation (Ohio State University).



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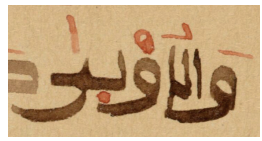
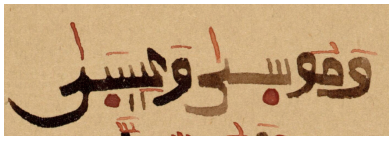
5r, l. 3 *ʿurwatu wuṯqē*[34]

30r, l. 7 *al-aʿlē*[35]



32r, l. 4 *al-ūlē*



80r, l. 1 *wa-mūsē wa-ʿīsē*

262r, l. 7 *bi-ʾasmâʾika l-ḥusnē*

Figure 9: Final-weak ***ʾimālah*** in MS Or. 2251

Folios 163r, which is a section that alludes to, but does not reproduce verbatim, *Sūrat al-Layl*, with two cases of word-final phonemic *ʾimālah*, and one case of a different type of *ʾimālah* in *an-nahēri*, which will be discussed below.

Figure 9: 163r, l. 1–3[36] l. 1 *ʾiḏā yaġšē wa-ṣalli ʿalā*,
l. 2 *Muḥammadin fī n-nahēri* l. 3 *ʾiḏā tajallē wa-ṣalli ʿalā*

While orthographically spelled with an *ʾalif*, *ad-dunyē* is well-known to have word-final *ʾimālah* despite its spelling (because it is *ʾalif al-taʾnīṯ*, the marker of the feminine). This is what we find in the Quranic reading traditions, and this is in fact confirmed by Quranic rhyme. It is also well-attested in this manuscript. Besides this, we find one case of a

[34] See also 66v, l. 1.
[35] See also 49r, l. 4.; 107r, l. 3; 181v, l. 4.
[36] See again 226r, l. 4–5.



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word-internal *ē* (also known in Quranic recitation) that is attested in this document, namely the word *al-tawrēh* 'the Torah'.

116r, l. 2 *ad-dunyē*[37] 240v, l. 5 *fī t-tawrēti*

Figure 10: Other cases of *'imālah* in MS Or. 2251

### 4.3 *Other cases of* 'Imālah

Besides the phonemic word-final /ē/, there is also *'imālah* that can be seen as a kind of *i-umlaut*, where historical /ā/ shifts to [ē] in the vicinity of /i/, as long as there is no emphatic consonant that flanks it. This type of *'imālah* is well-attested in the modern Mesopotamian dialects (Levin, 1992; Van Putten, 2023a), and is described by Sībawayh (1988, IV: 117–120). This type of *'imālah* is strictly part of Classical Arabic and need not necessarily reflect the underlying vernacular. In Quranic recitation, traces of this type of *'imālah* occur frequently, but usually irregularly in the readings in which it occurs. Most prominent here are the lexical *'imālah* of *(al-)kēfirīna* (but not *(al-)kāfirūna*!) and when words which end in *-ār* are followed by the genitive, *'imālah* is even applied when an emphatic or uvular consonant flanks it. This is a practice found with the al-Dūrī from al-Kisā'ī, 'Abū 'Amr, and the transmission of Warš from Nāfi' (who pronounces it with *'imālah bayna bayn*, *ā̄*, Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §2050, §2051, §2073).[38] Influence from the recitational mode of Warš is no doubt why the West African manuscript of *Dalā'il al-xayrāt* adopts *'imālah* in these environments.[39] Here, the presence of *'imālah* can certainly not be attributed to colloquial intrusion (not in the least because the intrusion would have been Bambara, Songhay, or Touareg rather than Arabic).

[37] See also 122r, l. 3; 140v, l. 7; 151v, l. 6; 152r, l. 7; 153r, l. 2; 153v, l. 3; 154r, 6; 156r, l. 5; 156v, l. 6; 158r, l. 6; 159r, l. 4; 160r, l. 5; 160v, l. 4; 161v, l. 2; 162r, l. 1; 173v, l. 1; 175v, l. 1, 7; 177r, l. 7; 177v, l. 5; 178r, l. 3; 179v, l. 5; 180r, l. 5; 185r, l. 4; 197r, l. 1; 218r, l. 4; 218v, l. 4; 219r, l. 3; 219v, l. 4; 220v, l. 1, 6; 221v, l. 1; 222r, l. 7; 223r, l. 7; 223v, l. 7; 224r, l. 6; 225r, l. 3.

[38] The *'imālah* of *(al-)kēfirīna* is also transmitted for Ruways (d. 238/852) from Ya'qūb (d. 205/820).

[39] Influence of the transmission of Warš from Nāfi' in vocalised *Dalā'il al-xayrāt* manuscripts is also observed by me for another West African and North African manuscript (Van Putten, 2021b).



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142r, l. 6 *ʿalā n-nahēri*[40]

197r, l. 7 *fī n-nēri*[41]

260r, l. 5 *al-qarēri*

248r, l. 2 al-kēfirīna

Figure 10: *i*-umlaut *ʾimālah* in MS Or. 2251

In other cases, such as in the transmission of Qutaybah (d. after 200/816) from the Kufan reader al-Kisāʾī, we see that its combination of final weak *ʾimālah*, *i*-umlaut *ʾimālah*, and raising of the pausal feminine ending *-eh* closely mirrors that of what is still found today in Mesopotamian Qəltu dialects, which no doubt must have some relation to the fact that this reading tradition is, in fact, Mesopotamian (Van Putten, 2023a).[42]

In Early Judeo-Arabic orthography, we occasionally find a *yuḏ* where we expect *ā*. I agree with Blau & Hopkins (1987, 134) that such cases likely point to *ʾimālah*.[43] The use of the ʾimālized form of the name *ʿimrān*, i.e. עמרין for *ʿimrēn*, in a corpus of texts that otherwise shows no signs of *i*-umlaut *ʾimālah* is rather reminiscent of the occurrence of the form *ʿimrēn* in Quranic recitation. Ibn Ḏakwān (d. 242/856) from Ibn ʿĀmir (d. 118/736) is reported to have recited the name as *ʿimrēn* whenever it occurs in the Qurʾān. He also used *ʾImālah* for

[40] See also 163r, l. 2; 169v, l. 7; 187r, l. 3.

[41] See also 200v, l. 6; 259v, l. 4.

[42] In this article, I used the description of Qutaybah's reading based on the description of Ibn Mihrān (1990). The *i*-umlaut *ʾimālah* in the transmission path described by him, while reminiscent of the system as described by the grammarians still shows a number of irregularities. However, the description of Qutaybah as transmitted by al-Xuzāʿī (2013, 510) is simply and explicitly the regular application of the *i*-umlaut *ʾimālah*, with five lexical exceptions.

[43] Although it should be noted that בטיעתוה, presumably *bi-ṭēʿat-oh* 'in his obedience' has *ʾimālah* appear in an environment where it would be blocked according to the rules of *ʾimālah* laid out by Sībawayh (Sībawayh, 1988, IV, 177–144).



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*al-ʾikrēmi* (Q55:27, 78) and *ʾikrēhihinna* (Q24:32) but otherwise has no *ʾimālah* in his reading tradition (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §2078). One might wonder whether, rather than reflecting a trace of *ʾimālah* that may have been present in the colloquial that underlies the Judeo-Arabic letter, this *ʾimālah* is instead borrowed along with this proper name into the register of the authors, something that may have likewise happened in Ibn Ḏakwān's recitation register.

## 4. Barth-Ginsberg Alternation

While the presence of the vowel *i* in the prefix vowel of the imperfect (e.g. *tiʿlam*) has often been considered to be a neo-Arabic feature (e.g. Ferguson, 1959, 621), it was recorded as a common feature by the medieval grammarians. This feature is sometimes labeled *taltalah*, though this meaning has been significantly expanded in dialectological literature to refer to any occurrence of *i* or Ø in morphemes where Classical Arabic has *a*.[44] This phenomenon is well-known from the Arabic grammatical tradition, but not as a general raising of the prefix of any imperfect verb stem. Instead, the vowel *i* in the prefix is used only if the vowel *after* the prefix is *a* (i.e. *CaCiCa/-CcaC* verbs and derived verbs such as *istaCcaCa, iCtaCaCaCa, inCaCaCa*). This vowel is found for the *ʾv-, tv-* and *nv-* prefix but notably not for the *ya-* prefix which always has *a*.[45]

This feature is well-known among the Arab grammarians as an eastern Arabian feature and is not obviously considered negative in relationship to the Western Arabian practice to have an *a* vowel in such forms (Sībawayh, 1988, IV, 110–13; al-Farrāʾ 2014, 6–9). Already Bloch (1967) noticed that this distribution is more-or-less identical to the Barth-Ginsberg Law in Hebrew and Aramaic, which attests to the same alternation of *a* and *i* depending on the stem vowel of the imperfect stem. This distribution is therefore an archaic phenomenon that is reconstructible for Proto-Arabic. The Hijazi forms with invariant *a* is the innovative form.

[44] Already in Ferguson (1959, 621) though certainly not all of these are in fact cases of raising, e.g. the absence of a vowel of the *-ta-* prefix of the stem V prefix conjugation *yitʿallam* is likely an archaism rather than an innovation (Diem, 1982; Van Putten, 2022, 112).

[45] Except with I-*w* and I-ʾ verbs, which have forms such as *yīǧalu* and *yiʾbē* (Sībawayh, 1988, IV: 110; al-Farrāʾ, 2014, 8).



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This specific distribution of the prefix vowel is retained in Najdi Arabic (Ingham, 1994, 20) and traces of it can still be found in Maltese and to a lesser extent in Tunisian and the Egypto-Levantine dialects (Van Putten, 2020b). It also continued in the high register of Arabic of the Qur'ān. The Kufan reader and traditionist al-'Aʿmaš (d. 148/765), teacher of the canonical reader Ḥamzah read with Barth-Ginsberg alternation of the *nV-* and *tV-* prefixes, though notably not of the 1SG. *'v-* prefix, which he always read with *'a-* (al-Rūḏbārī, 2017, II: 305; Sibṭ al-Xayyāṭ, 2006, II: 6). With less detail about the precise conditioning, the use of front vowel prefixes is also attributed by al-Rūḏbārī and Ibn Mihrān to al-'Aʿmaš's teacher Yaḥyā b. Waṯṯāb (d. 103/722) (al-Rūḏbārī, 2017, loc. cit.; Ibn Mihrān, 2017, 93).[46] The exceptional state of the 1SG. marker always being *'a-* in al-'Aʿmaš's reading is notable in light of modern dialectology, because we find the same *'a-* form in Najdi Arabic (although in Najdi Arabic, unlike Classical Arabic also *yV-* has a *i*), i.e. *yisma*ʿ, *tisma*ʿ, *nisma*ʿ but *'asma*ʿ (Ingham, 1994, 24).

This alternation seems to have fallen out of use quite quickly in Quranic recitation, al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) already says that, while there are readers (i.e., the Kufans al-'Aʿmaš and Yaḥyā b. Waṯṯāb) who recite with this alternation, the Quranic recitation follows the Hijazi practice with *a* (al-Farrā' 2014, 6f.). However, it continued to be a feature used in literary works written by Christians. The fully vocalised Mamluk era Gospel translation Sinai Arabic MS 68 (1520–21 CE) reproduces perfectly the alternation as prescribed by the Arab grammarians (Stokes et al., 2024).

Figure 11: Sinai Arabic MS 68, f. 7v.: tiḥbal wa-talid ibnan wa-yadʿūna 'ismahū ʿammānū'īl

[46] However, the citation of al-Farrā' of Yaḥyā b. Waṯṯāb's reading *'iḍṭarruhū* makes it clear that, unlike his student al-'Aʿmaš he did have the vowel *i* in the 1SG.prefix (al-Farrā', 1983, I, 87; ibn Xālawayh, 2009, 9).



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## 5. Anaptyxis & Syncope

There are many cases where we need to be very careful about what we consider the 'base' or 'standard' form and the 'developed' form. Nowhere is this issue as apparent as it is with nouns of the shape CuCuC. While there are some instances in which it really does seem that CuCuC is contrastive with CuCC in at least some forms of Classical Arabic (e.g. *ḥumr* as the plural of *'aḥmar* 'red' versus *ḥumur* as the plural of *ḥimār* 'donkey'), CuCuC can always syncopate to CuCC (Sībawayh, 1988, III, 601) and this occurs very frequently in poetry, because CuCuCv- fits into Arabic meters rather poorly. Thus, we find such syncopated forms even as late as *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* by al-Būsīrī (d. 1294):

> *wa-kullu 'āyin 'atā r-ruslu l-kirāmu bihā fa-'innamā ttaṣalat min nūrihī bihimī*
>
> 'And each of the signs that the noble messengers bring They are only connected to them through His light'

Likewise, much variation between CuCuC and CuCC stems occurs in the Quranic reading traditions, and these often even defy any regularity within a single reading (Van Putten, 2022, 60–62), e.g. *'uḏun~'uḏn*, *qudus~quds*.

This kind of allomorphy is a typical part of the Classical register throughout the centuries, and is exploited to great effect in poetry, but is also found to alternate in non-metric prose, e.g. the variation of of *'uḏ(u)n* in copies of *Dalā'il al-xayrāt* (Van Putten, 2021b, 384). Yet, when Blau & Hopkins (1987, 154f.) encounter the Judeo-Arabic spelling תולות 'a third', correctly identified as representing *ṯuluṯ*, they suggest that the second vowel is anaptyptic and that 'the occurrence of such anaptyxis presupposes the loss of the case endings, i.e. *ṯulṯu-* > *ṯulṯ* > *ṯuluṯ*'. This is a rather puzzling statement that presupposes that the Classical form of this stem is *ṯulṯ-*. This is the form reported in the dictionary of Hans Wehr, and the primary form listed by Fischer (2002, §134, but besides *ṯuluṯ-*!) and appears to have become the standard in Modern Standard Arabic. But *ṯuluṯ* is an acceptable biform, just as both *'uḏn* and *'uḏun* are acceptable biforms for 'ear', and this is what one finds in the medieval lexicographical works (and thus also in Lane, 1863, 347c). But Blau & Hopkins take *ṯulṯ-* as the original and only form, and on this unwarranted assumption draw rather sweeping conclusions about the case system of Judaeo-Arabic from the *ṯuluṯ-* form. But on what basis? Certainly not on the basis of the Qur'ān. All canonical reading traditions read this word as *ṯuluṯ-* whenever it occurs (Q4:11 *ṯuluṯā mā*, *aṯ-ṯuluṯu*, Q4:12 *aṯ-ṯuluṯi*; Q4:176 *aṯ-ṯuluṯāni*;



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Q73:20 *ṯuluṯayi l-layli,*[47] *ṯuluṯahū*), as is the case with all other fractions attested in the Qurʾān. We can hardly argue that we are dealing with anaptyxis due to the loss of final case vowels in these reading traditions. As the *ṯulṯ-* stem is just as standard and eloquent Arabic as the *ṯuluṯ-* form, this form is of course attested with readers other than the ten canonical readers. Thus, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Nuʿaym b. Maysarah (d. 174/791) are reported to have read *ar-rubʿ, as-suds, aṯ-ṯumn* and *aṯ-ṯulṯ* whenever they occur (Ibn Xālawayh 2009, 25). Its rarity among the readers, if anything, should be understood as an indication that *ṯuluṯ-* is the more typical form, and *ṯulṯ-* the syncopated or derived form, rather than the other way around.

The failure to recognize the possibility for CuCC nouns as having biforms of the shape CuCuC has broader implications. For example, for nouns of this type that have a final *hamzah*. The noun *juzʾ* 'part', in the Qurʾān is spelled جز, and this appears to have become accepted as the standard form in Modern Standard Arabic. The Middle Arabic corpora frequently attest forms such as جزوا or جزو (Blau, 1967, 87–88; 2002, 33) which are interpreted as cases of anaptyxis, and subsequent loss of *hamzah* (**juzʾ* > **juzuʾ* > *juzū*). Needless to say, the absence of a marked *hamzah* certainly does not argue against the possibility that جزو simply represents *juzuʾ*, and considering the widespread alternation of CuCC and CuCuC forms regardless of whether historically *CuCC or *CuCuC, it is not obvious that this needs to be interpreted as a case of anaptyxis, syncope or simply inherited morphological variation. Whatever the interpretation, this is a type variation that falls under the umbrella of Classical Arabic. In Quranic recitation it is mostly read *juzʾ-*, but Šuʿbah from ʿĀṣim reads it *juzuʾ-* (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §2675). The spelling with *wāw* (and thus the Classical form *juzuʾ*), far from being 'post-Classical' or 'neo-Arabic' as Blau (2002, 33) labels it, is quite common in Classical Arabic manuscripts. It is the spelling consistently used in Or. 298, the copy of ʾAbū ʿUbayd's *Ġarīb al-Ḥadīṯ* from 252 AH/866 CE, in the division headings preserved in this copy. It is likewise the spelling found in the copy of *al-Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. ca. 380/990) held at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (Ar. 3315) which is believed to have been copied from the autograph some time near the end of the 4th or early 5th Islamic century. The same spelling is found in the accusative form in the front cover of a section of a Quranic manuscript Ar. 358c (D.II style, approximately 9th century) held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

[47] Only Hišām transmitting from Ibn ʿĀmir reads this specific word syncopated as *ṯulṯayi* (ibn al-Ǧazarī, 2018, §2692).



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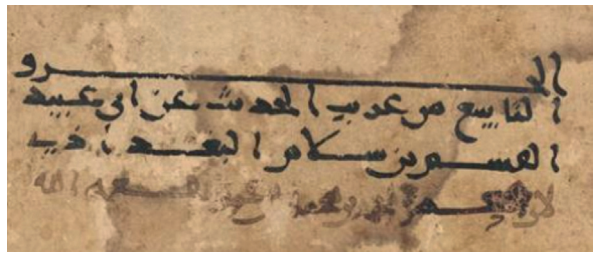
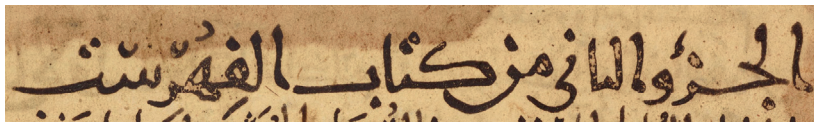
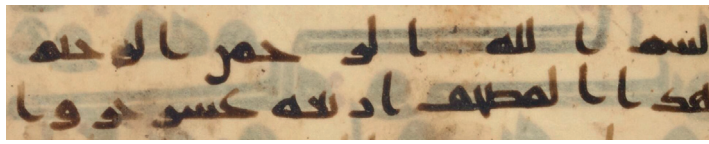


Or. 298, 1r, l.1–2. *al-juzu'u t-tāsi'u min ġarībi l-ḥadīṯi 'an 'abī 'ubayd*



Ar. 3315, 17r, l. 1. *al-juzu'u aṯ-ṯānī min kitābi l-fihrist*



Ar. 358c, 21r, l. 2. *hāḏā l-muṣḥafu 'arba'ata 'ašara juzu'an*

Figure 11: Examples of *juzu'* spelled with *wāw*

Syncope, and perhaps anaptyxis, of course do play a role in the language. The medieval grammarians readily admitted that Arabs from Najd would drop *u* and *i* in open syllables where Hijazis would retain it (Sībawayh, 1988, IV, 113–15; al-Farrā', 2014, 29). The metrical space that this gives was exploited by poets, and such forms existed side-by-side in Classical Arabic. As it stands, we have no idea what the relative distribution of those forms are. One would imagine that these features differ from place and time. We already saw that the retention of the *hamzah* in *nabī'* 'prophet' and *nubū'ah* 'prophecy' appears to be a North/West African phenomenon. One can imagine that whether one adopts *'uḏun, qudus* and *juzu'* against *'uḏn, quds* and *juz'* may very well also be distributed temporally and geographically. CuC(u)' nouns like *juz(u)'* are especially well-suited to test such a hypothesis because one is not reliant on fully vocalized manuscripts to detect them, and it occurs in a word that is fairly common because *juz'* is often used as the term of subdivisions in Classical Arabic texts. By relegating the phenomenon of حزو spellings to 'Middle Arabic', this gives the mistaken impression that this is not part of the linguistic variation of the Classical language, an impression further strengthened by the relentless



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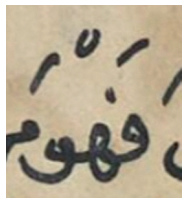
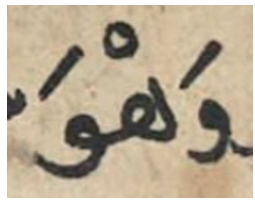
classicization of modern text editions of Classical Arabic texts, which 'correct' such spellings to حزء. This flattens our understanding of Classical Arabic as a language in time, and therefore also the ability to meaningfully compare non-standard middle Arabic linguistic practice within the contemporary linguistic norms of the standard language of their time.

### 5.1 *Wa-hwa and fa-hya*

Another example in which the syncope of vowels leads to clear linguistic variation within Classical Arabic is found with the third person independent pronouns *huwa* and *hiya*, which undergo syncope of the high vowels in dialects that would do so in other *u* and *i* in open syllables as well when a proclitic *wa-* or *fa-* is appended to these forms (al-Farrāʾ, 2014, 29; Sībawayh, 1988, IV, 151). Both forms like *wa-huwa, fa-hiya* and syncopated forms *wa-hwa* and *fa-hya* are well-attested among the canonical readers. While the unsyncopated form is a slight majority, the syncopated forms are found with Qālūn (d. 220/835) from Nāfiʿ, ʾAbū ʿAmr (d. 154/770), al-Kisāʾī and ʾAbū Jaʿfar (Ibn al-Jazarī, 2018, §2641). These forms were in competition with one another in Classical Arabic in the early Islamic period. As the unsyncopated forms yield a metrical |U U X| sequence that is quite difficult to fit into most contexts in most poetic meters, the syncopated forms are exceptionally common in poetry, but these forms are not particularly common in prose in Modern Standard Arabic anymore.[48] However, such syncopated forms are commonly attested in vocalized medieval manuscripts. The *al-Majmūʿah al-Rašīdiyyah* from 1310, for example, uses it consistently (see Figure 12).



BnF Arabe 2324, 3v, l. 19, *fa-hwa*



BnF Arabe 2324, 7v, l. 21 *wa-hwa*

Figure 12: Syncopated cases of ***huwa***

[48] Although Mitchell (1960, 371n2) reports *wáhwa* and *wáhya* as the regular way of pronouncing these forms for Classical Arabic as spoken in Egypt at the time.



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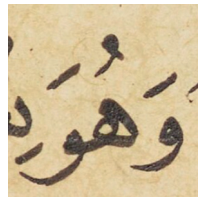
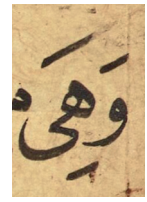
But other manuscripts have unsyncopated forms. For example the 1170 AH/1756–7 CE Ottoman copy of the *Dalā'il al-xayrāt* has the unsyncopated form (See Figure 13):



BnF Arabe 6859, 10v, l. 4



BnF Arabe 6859, 9v, l.5 *wa-hiya*

Figure 13: Unsyncopated cases of *huwa* and *hiya*

This syncope is a point of internal variation within Classical Arabic, and one would expect likewise in Middle Arabic. It should be possible, through careful examination of primary sources, to get a much better sense of the geography and chronology of the use of these forms, which has so far been glossed over.

## 5.2 *Wa-li-yaf'al*

While the unsyncopated form of *wa-huwa*, *fa-hiya* and *la-hiya* etc. has by now become the standard in Classical Arabic, this does not mean that the unsyncopated forms always win out. The so-called *lām al-'amr* in what has become the modern standard occurs in a similar phonetic environment, but does typically undergoes syncope, thus we find *li-yaktub* 'may he write!' and *fa-l-yaktub* 'so may he write!'. This is an irregularity of a sound change in Modern Standard Arabic, where the same syncopation fails to apply in one case, but does apply in another case in the same environment. It seems that for Sībawayh (1988, IV: 151f.) this was not the natural situation. He recognized both the unsyncopated and syncopated forms of *wa-huwa/wa-hwa* as valid Classical Arabic, and likewise recognized the syncopated (*fa-l-yaktub*) and unsyncopated (*fa-li-yaktub*) form of the *lām al-'amr* and explicitly connects these phenomena, saying: 'Whoever removes (the vowel of) the *hā'* in the case of *hiya* and *huwa* removes the *kasrah* of the *lām* in this case'. Al-Farrā' (2014, 29) likewise connects the syncopation of *wa-hwa* with *wa-l-naḥmil* etc., saying that the syncopated form is more common than the unsyncopated form, but that no syncopation is likewise allowed, thus indicating that such forms fall within the purview of Classical Arabic.



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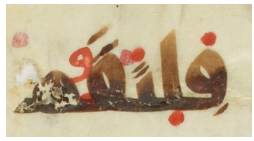
The canonical transmissions of the ten canonical readers all adopt the syncopated form of the *lām al-ʾamr*, regardless of whether they syncopate the vowels of *wa-huwa*, *fa-hiya* etc. But regular use of unsyncopated forms are well-attested and reported for al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Šaybah (d. 130/747), Ibn Miqsam (d. 351/962), al-Kisāʾī and Qutaybah ← ʾAbū Jaʿfar (d. 130/747) and al-Rūmī ← ʿAbbās (al-Rūḏbārī 2017, II: 368; al-Huḏalī 2016, IV: 63).[49] It is also well-attested in Quranic manuscripts. I have found regular use of these in a number of B.II style manuscripts (8th-9th century): Walters Art Museum W. 552, Leiden Or. 6814, Cambridge University Library Add. 1122, BnF Arabe 399, BnF Arabe 5122, BnF Arabe 329d, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Landberg 834, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. mixt. 917, and it is also found in the A.I manuscript BnF Arabe 330(f). These attestations of an unsyncopated *lām al-ʾamr*, while eventually lost in the standard, was part of Classical Arabic in the early Islamic period.



Arabe 330(f) 34r, l. 4
Q4:102 *fa-li-taqum*

Arabe 330(f) 34r, l. 5
Q4:102 *wa-li-yaʾxuḏ*

Arabe 330(f) 34r, l. 6, Q4:102
*fa-li-yakūnū*

Arabe 330(f) 34r, l. 7, Q4:102
*wa-li-taʾti*

Arabe 330(f) 34r, l. 8, Q4:102
*fa-li-yuṣallū*

Arabe 330(f) 34r, l. 9
*wa-li-yaʾxuḏ*

Figure 14: unsyncopated *lām al-ʾamr* in Arabe 330(f)

[49] It is also reported for others such as ʿAlī b. ʾAbī Ṭālib and ʿĪsā b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān a-ʾAnṣārī (d. Unknown, but same generation as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī who dies 110) by Ibn Xālawayh (ibn Xālawayh, 2009, 12) explicitly for Q2:185 *fa-li-yaṣumhu*.



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## 6. Conclusion

The disparate features discussed here are of course interesting and worth describing. In a good number of cases good historical linguistic reasons can be proffered to argue that certain forms are innovative relative to other forms (e.g. *ṭiyūr* is certainly innovative compared to *ṭuyūr*). What is important is that we understand what exactly we are arguing. If every time we see a form that does not align with our 21st century sensibilities of what 'Classical Arabic' is supposed to be, is subsequently taken as necessarily reflecting the vernacular of the scribe, we would be forced to take many works throughout the literary history of Classical Arabic to contain Middle Arabic-like vernacularisms. This would even include the Qur'ān, whose recitation is typically held to be one of the main sources for Classical Arabic. Allowing this kind of looseness of the definitions of Middle Arabic, vernacular and Classical Arabic renders these terms all but useless.

This risks overidentification of 'vernacularisms'. It is clear that many features considered part of Classical Arabic by the grammarians and Quranic reciters have often been misidentified as vernacularisms in Middle Arabic texts out of a lack of awareness of the vastness of linguistic options that still fall under the umbrella of Classical Arabic. This does not mean that features found among Classical authors or Quranic reciters are never the result of vernacular influence, but if such features are acceptable as Classical Arabic, it becomes impossible to tell whether said feature was chosen because it was the author's high register target or their vernacular shining through. This can lead to flipping the sociolinguistic evaluations of certain forms on their head. When we see a form that we might not recognize from Modern Standard Arabic but that is part of Classical Arabic, it may very well be that in this case the author made the sociolinguistic choice towards an option in the high register, rather than an attempt to write in a low register. Such cases seem quite likely in cases where early texts represent a specific norm that is later lost. For example, the use of the اعشر *iʿšar* base. This is the standard form in the early official documentary papyri and was therefore likely the high register target, even if hypothetically, the scribe's own vernacular used the *ʿašar* form. By taking this as a pseudo-correction, rather than part of the early scribal register (and early Medinan Quranic recitation register) we run the risk of drawing the opposite conclusion from the one we should. This is why the norms of the high register should be understood by their contemporary sources, and not by imposing Modern Standard Arabic norms onto the 7th, 8th or 9th centuries.



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Likewise, if such a form is not part of the standard high register of a scribe, when we are dealing with religious texts, deviations from 'standard norms' may very well be attributed to influence from the norms of Quranic recitation, rather than intrusions of the vernacular. Influence of this kind can be identified in copies of the prayer book *Dalāʾil al-xayrāt*. If we find *hamzah*-less forms like *mūmin* for 'believer' in such a text, this should not be attributed to influence of a hamzah-less vernacular, but rather a conscious adaptation towards the Quranic recitation style of Warš ʿan Nāfiʿ.

It is also the case that not being clear on the actual variation in Classical Arabic may lead to incorrect assumptions about the actual developmental direction. Blau & Hopkins argue that the fact that a Judeo-Arabic letter shows the form *ṯuluṯ* serves as evidence for the loss of word-final case vowels, seemingly unaware of the fact that all canonical reading traditions of the Qurʾān have both *ṯuluṯ-* and case vowels.

A similar confusion of the facts can be observed in the suggestion that case must have been lost because the 3SGM suffix *-hum* is not 'properly' harmonizing. Lack of harmony of *-hum* after a *i*, *ī* and *ay* is perfectly part of Classical Arabic, and well-attested in Quranic recitation. It seems likely that many, if not all, modern dialects descend from a dialect that never had this vowel harmony of the pronominal suffixes to begin with. Lack of harmony is an acceptable and well-attested feature within the variation of Classical Arabic. Therefore, forgoing vowel harmony does not tell us anything about the nature of the language's underlying case system, or the register that the author is attempting to reflect by using such forms.

While not recognizing the variation present in Classical Arabic writing when examining the linguistic features of not-quite-Classical writings is a problem in and of itself, it also exposes a gap in our knowledge of the linguistic variation in Classical Arabic itself. Many features that get dismissed as non-Classical or even not part of the Qurʾān—such as final weak *ʾimālah*—in fact continue to have a vibrant life in Classical Arabic writings, sometimes as late as the 20th century. At the moment we have a very narrow view of the actual linguistic variation present in Classical Arabic. Certainly, some of the features examined here will show both temporal and geographical trends. As of this writing, we have no idea what these are. As a result, we are unable to even decide what the Classical Arabic register that Middle Arabic is supposedly interacting with is. The relentless 'correction' applied by editors of classical texts render text editions all but useless for the purposes of linguistic study on the level of phonology and morphophonology. For this we must return to the manuscripts, which luckily have now been digitized *en masse*.



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For the study of microvariation of syntax in Classical Arabic across space and time, we are likely in a better place. Initiatives such as the Open Islamicate Texts Initiative (Nigst, et al. 2023) have aggregated and made easily accessible an enormous amount of edited Classical Arabic texts across many different genres in a computer readable format. Through the use of Natural Language Processing it should be possible to get much significant and salient data from this corpus in terms of syntactic variation. As of yet, such studies are to my knowledge non-existent.[50]

This paper has aimed to make clear the enormous variation in Classical Arabic, as described by the grammarians, as it occurs in Quranic recitation, or as it occurs in later medieval or even early modern texts which has been largely overlooked. The uncritical assumption that Classical Arabic has been identical from the 7th century up until today has misled both the study of Middle Arabic and the study of Classical Arabic. This cannot remain the status quo going forward in our study of the history of Arabic. The actual attested history of Arabic as recorded in manuscripts should inform the way we understand the history of this language in all its richness and variation.

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[50] For Modern Standard Arabic as used in newspapers, some highly interesting and useful research has been conducted (e.g. Wilmsen, 2010). Such investigations could and should obviously be expanded to to historical works of Classical Arabic.



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